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Reading the Landscape of Bates

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Place-Making // Making of Bates

Ella Bourland

One of the most compelling aspects of archival research is its propensity to reveal change over the years. For example, an artifact showcasing an architectural endeavour from the seventeenth century is decidedly different from one made in the twenty-first century. The difference between the two is not necessarily in the artist's ability or imagination, but rather in the backdrop of the world in which they lived. The technological terrain is vastly different in each example, affording one possibilities that were unavailable to the other.

In a similar way, a twenty-first century landscape reflects a particular human relationship with the environment. However, there is often no consideration for what that relationship is or how it has changed over time. There is often no explicit rationale for why structures are arranged in a particular order, why certain designs or materials were used in construction, or why walls were built and torn down. The resources just get reworked, and the knowledge of the previous generations falls into the archives.

When I walk the lawns of Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, I like to position myself amongst the parties of people and administrations that have walked before me. The Bates landscape, and more specifically the little lake in the corner, is what it is today because of the perceptions of our predecessors. The Puddle has at one time or another been recognized as a bog, a resource to produce ice, a recreational hangout, a chemical wasteland, an expensive environmental problem, and a sculpted garden.

The picturesque garden lake, as it stands today, represents a version of harmony between humans and the land, where one can waddle like a duck around the bends of the lake. However, this single-story reduces the long history of the Puddle to one that fits today's perceptions and norms. In the Edmund Muskie Archive Collection, I found a snapshot of the Puddle's history that may not sound so sanitary to modern readers: the recollection of a woman who spent several of her childhood years on campus in the mid-1800s reveals that Batesies actually used to drink from the Puddle.

Mrs. Ames dispels the belief that the Puddle started as a bog. She states that it was a man-made reservoir used by the residents of nearby dormitories. According to Mrs. Ames, Bates' first President found natural springs near Parker Hall, that broke through fissures in the bedrock. He connected the springs to the low-lying ground at the rear of Parker to form a pool, or Puddle. The water was used to supply the daily intake of the students: men walked down the slope with their pails, while the women, "more favoured", had the water channeled to them through a pipe connected to the reservoir. A cistern was used as storage to support laundry services.

The early history of the Puddle evokes a land ethic that is anachronistic or out of place in the twenty-first century. It suggests a time when people were attentive to their landscape, taking into account the natural processes and working the existing flows and shapes of the earth into their own needs. Natural springs on campus presented a solution to a demand, so a system was designed to take advantage of the existing landscape.

Just as before, the current residents of Bates extract resources from their landscape, but at a scale and within a scope unlike the early days of residency. Many of the residents sit, study, and walk the greens, comfortably ignorant of their impact in the distant reaches: water is sourced from a lake nearly 11 miles away, food is grown at the land on our periphery, and sources of electricity on campus is increasingly contentious as activists push to divest from fossil fuels.

What was once utilized within the campus landscape is now placid — for viewing eyes only. The Puddle seems only to serve an aesthetic value. What else of Bates’s campus history is known to the modern student? How did considerations of land, organization of building and resource, change over the decades? Did other salient features of campus which now appear only to have aesthetic value, have an express purpose lost to the annals of time? Such considerations are valuable for understanding the changing relationships people have to the landscape in which they are set. What's behind these changes can teach us how to modify our perspective of what we think we're seeing, and perhaps even deepen our appreciation of how we utilize our space.



Bates students brave the freezing temperatures for the annual “Puddle Jump.” The extreme conditions of this tradition encourage participants to drink — albeit a different kind of liquid than what’s found in the puddle.

*Photo taken by
Mike Bradley
in January 2113.*